

Childcare, language training lacking, but 'key' to Syrian integration: Senate report ^[1]

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For thousands and thousands of Syrian refugees, the winter months mark one year since arriving on Canadian soil. Many, however, still speak neither English nor French, which poses a "formidable" obstacle to their integration in their Canadian communities, a Senate committee's months-long study into the federal refugee resettlement program found.

As these refugees enter their "13th month," they will be cut off from the financial assistance Ottawa has so far provided; any legal obligations for private sponsors will too expire. As a result, refugees still requiring assistance will begin receiving provincially-funded social aid.

"This is a particularly crucial time for the Syrian refugees we have welcomed to Canada," said Sen. Jim Munson, who chairs the human rights committee.

"We want more for these families than to see them living along the poverty line and going to food banks. No refugee, or any Canadian for that matter, should have to choose between feeding the family well and paying for their rent."

Being able to speak one or both of Canada's official languages is "a basic requirement" for taking part in Canadian society, the Senate committee determined.

"The government is offering courses, however many refugees, particularly women, find themselves unable to attend because childcare is not available," Munson said Tuesday when the committee released its report.

That gap in services has an especially negative effect for women and their children, the report states.

One settlement agency – the only agency in Nova Scotia providing resettlement assistance programs – told the Senate committee in May that there "is not enough childcare attached to language training programs."

That agency said it has 39 babies younger than 18 months old who, if they aren't able to attend daycare, will be "another lost group and they will have very little English by the time they go to school."

Immigration Minister John McCallum has repeatedly pegged language education as a top priority for his department, especially with regard to Syrian refugees.

"We have committed hundreds of millions of dollars to this enterprise and just last month we invested an additional \$18 million dollars for language training ... And since April, we have created 7,000 new language spaces," McCallum said Tuesday.

"We understand that when refugees come from a war-torn situation the adjustment will never be immediate. There will always be a period of adjustment, but we are doing everything in our power, along with provincial governments to support these new Canadians."

In October, the committee heard from the immigration and citizenship department that 64 per cent of eligible Syrian refugees outside of Quebec had enrolled in language training by the end of August.

The number rises to 95 per cent of government-assisted refugees and 79 per cent of privately sponsored refugees when including conversational classes and provincially funded classes, the department said.

One committee witness said problems with access to language training are especially dire outside of urban centres, where many refugees have resettled. Zena Al Hamdan, program manager with the Arab Community Centre of Toronto, said rural areas often don't have lower-level English classes available.

Those refugees with limited language skills, she told the committee, are unable to find work despite many being highly skilled in high-demand trades.

“Without proper language training, refugees will not be able to move forward with their lives in Canada,” the report reads.

“This is months 13 for many of them,” Munson told reporters on Tuesday. “The whole premise of language training is the key, as we’ve seen, in every way, shape or form.”

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